

ORNAMENTAL PROJECTIONS OVER PUBLIC WAYS.

THE following circular has been addressed to the district surveyors, from the "Office of Metropolitan Buildings."

SIR.—With respect to the rule in schedule E of the Metropolitan Buildings Act, headed "Projections from walls of buildings over public ways," and to the circular addressed to district surveyors on the 3rd of November ult., suggesting what it might be the duty of a district surveyor to do in cases to which that rule might apply, I beg, on the part of the official referees and myself, to inform you, that serious doubts having been raised, as to whether such rule is intended to apply to buildings which were built before the Metropolitan Buildings Act came into operation, upon their being rebuilt. The suggestion alluded to is to be understood to be limited to cases of building new buildings, and of rebuilding buildings originally built since the Metropolitan Buildings Act came into operation.

In the mean time, the question whether the Act does or does not require the walls of buildings built before the Act came into operation, when rebuilt, to be set back, so that all intended projections shall only overhang the ground of the owner, is to be considered as yet undecided by the official referees; no case of this kind having arisen upon either requisition or information.

It is to be understood, at the same time, that it is competent to any district surveyor, or to any person interested, to raise the question upon any case of the kind occurring, when the formal decision of the official referees must be made upon it.

Dec. 8th.

ARTHUR SYMONDS,
Registrar of Metropolitan Buildings.

The circular of the 3rd of November caused considerable excitement, and promised some difficulties. The letter given above will of course lessen the number of cases in which these will occur, but does not go so far as we venture to think the referees will find necessary when the matter again comes formally before them. Anxious as we are not to cavil, we are nevertheless obliged to dissent from even the amended view that has been taken of this question, and shall seek an early opportunity to state our dissent.

REMARKS ON NORMAN SARACENIC ARCHITECTURE, IN THE ISLAND OF SICILY.*

It is interesting to trace the progress of the various transitions in the architectural improvements which occurred during the period we are now examining. To the northmen we are indebted for the discovery of the vertical principle, which distinguishes the style adopted in the magnificent monuments which were erected in the middle ages. The principle was eliminated by a gradual process, at once curious and instructive. It was by no means the production of ingenuity, arriving at success by a sudden and happy stroke of its inventiveness. It was, on the contrary, the result of a persevering and aspiring genius dissatisfied with the expression of its thoughts, and conscious that a more noble and perfect representation could be attained, of the feelings and perceptions which it cherished.

The single Roman arch with its columnar supports, at first simply imitated and left to range through the whole elevation of the building, was soon deemed insufficient by the Norman architect. Greater height was required; and to procure this additional elevation a repetition of the arch was contemplated. Of this improvement, if such indeed it can be termed, examples were not wanting. Their predecessors, the Romans, had employed it during the decline of their empire in numerous instances; and from these models they could form an approximate judgment of the effect. An arch placed on the summit of another immediately below, added much to the lofty appearance of the building, and produced something of the grandeur at which they were aiming. A third arch was subsequently raised. But the superposition of the several tiers, though it increased the elevation, and so far improved the effect, caused a disjointed appearance displeasing to the eye, aggravated

still more by the unseemly and unmeaning repetition of the same feature. To obviate the defect, they had recourse to ornament. They decorated the wall on either side of the tiers, placing against it a thin single circular shaft, extending from the floor to the roof. This addition served to connect the parts, and assisted materially in producing the appearance of unity in design. But the columnar supports on either side of the several arches, presenting three distinct bases in the ascent of the tiers, destroyed in a great measure the good effect which the introduction of the thin shaft or single column had produced. To remedy this, it became necessary to unite the smaller columns, by removing the two upper bases and prolonging the shafts. The attention gave rise to the adoption of clustered piers; and subsequently, by taking away the intermediate spandrels and arch, the whole compartment or bay—originally consisting of several arches and columns—was converted into the lofty mediæval arch, supported on its lateral piers.

But an architectural peculiarity of the greatest importance is to be observed in the examples in Sicily, which appears in no edifice erected by the Normans in other countries anterior to their occupancy of the island. The pointed arch is first adopted in place of the semicircular.

From the middle of the eleventh to the middle of the twelfth centuries, the architecture which prevailed in France, and a little later in England, presents numerous examples of Norman art, uninfluenced by any other style except the debased Roman, from which it derived its origin. The specimens in these countries are generally considered to supply the most correct notions of the advancement made by the Norman architects. The general features of the style are the massive cylindrical or polygonal pier, the semicircular arch, the large round moulding often richly ornamented, the cushion with its rude grotesque capital, placed in the angle of a rectangle, and the moulding ornamented with the beak head chevron. Towers, and other decorations, are also used. Sculptured ornaments are at times employed in profusion in the interior. In design, the buildings are usually simple. The windows, ordinarily, are small, and frequently divided by the colonette. Pilasters or buttresses, of slight projection, assist in supporting the massive walls, and in the manner we observe a more regular and workmanlike method than is found in, and is characteristic of, the Romanesque.

These features are all common to what is called the debased Roman or Latin art, by some authors termed Romanesque, a style employed by the Lombards, Germans, Gauls, and Saxons at an earlier period, and found also in some of the oldest specimens of Norman-Saracenic, which still exist in Sicily. But it is in Sicily alone, in buildings of the eleventh century, that the Norman architects employed the pointed arch, which they received from the Saracens.

The Saracens who, as we have seen, entered the island of Sicily in A.D. 828, introduced the pointed arch into their buildings shortly after their establishment.

In a few instances, in places where the footsteps of the orientals may be traced, we find the pointed arch in use long prior to the ninth century. The oldest example with which we are acquainted may be seen in a mosaic in the church of St. Agatha, at Ravenna. Its date is assigned, with every probability of correctness, to the beginning of the 5th century. Ravenna was the principal port between that part of Europe and the East before Venice rose into consequence; intercourse with Greece and Constantinople soon changed the appearance of the city into that of an oriental capital. The arts were derived from Byzantium, at that time the seat of the eastern emperors, in which various instances of the adoption of the pointed arch may be seen. In confirmation of this opinion, we may notice, that the existence of this architectural feature in Spain, and Septimania, is to be referred to the period of the conquest of those countries by the Moors, after A.D. 713.

But the pointed form for an arch had previously been used by the Greeks and Romans; we might even go further back in history, and find examples: we can find a genuine Greek example existing at this day in Sicily. At the entrance to a tomb in the garden of the convent, Santa Maria delle Jezu, in Catania, this arch is employed. Its claim to antiquity is

proved by the unfailing evidence of the peculiarity of its construction. In Sicily, we discover no examples in which the Romans had adopted it; but numerous instances of their use of this arch are to be seen in Italy. And it was also employed by the Arabians in various edifices in Africa, Persia, Syria, and India, a considerable time previous to their incursions into Europe.

From Sicily we think the pointed arch—which appears in Saracenic edifices after A.D. 828, and in Norman after A.D. 1030—was diffused through the other countries of Europe. Its employment as a symbol of the Christian's aspiring faith may be just; but its invention for such a purpose is quite poetical, and entirely opposed to facts.

Manuscripts executed by the Byzantine artists during the 8th and 9th centuries, exhibit the pointed arch among the architectural ornaments; but in the School of Design, established in the 9th century for the illumination of manuscripts, during the Anglo-Saxon period, we discover no signs of the pointed arch. We have thus evidence of the use of this feature in the corrupt and apostatical east, while it appears to have been unknown in the west, still pure and unshaken in its fidelity.

In the cisalpine countries, the introduction of the pointed arch previous to the middle of the eleventh century appears to be very doubtful. The cathedral of Bamberg is supposed to have been erected as early as A.D. 1012; but the pointed arches in the present edifice appear not to have formed any part of the original structure to which the date would refer. And at Coutances, in Normandy, the cathedral in which the feature in question is also employed presents many sound reasons for pronouncing it an uncertain example. The earliest date assigned to this work is that for which M. de Caumont contends, but he does not venture to assume it to be prior to A.D. 1056.*

Subsequently to this period the history of the pointed arch is well known. It became very generally adopted throughout Europe. But the different countries in which the grand monuments of mediæval architecture exhibit this elegant and characteristic feature, are unquestionably indebted for their knowledge of it, in the first instance, to the architects of Sicily.

The ingenious theory which has obtained among some antiquaries, that the origin of the pointed arch is to be found in certain combinations of vaultings, in intersections of arches, and the peculiar contrivance adopted in the construction of buildings by the northern architects of the middle ages, is manifestly erroneous. The opinion is at once refuted by the facts to which we have drawn attention. It was used by the Normans in Sicily, and subsequently by the Italians and Germans, for some time prior to its introduction into Normandy, Belgium, and England. Derived from a clime far distant from our own, and from a people with whom Christianity could have no community of feeling, it has nevertheless proved a most valuable addition to architecture, increasing most materially the capabilities of the art, as well as improving the general appearance of buildings. This new element was unquestionably, the chief cause of the rapid progress to that perfection which was attained by the architects of the middle ages.

The Normans, during their stay in Sicily, imparted to the artists of the country many architectural features, which did not exist in any building erected previously to their arrival. They inserted grotesque heads, animals, and birds, among the foliage, ornamenting the capitals of their columns, and under the eaves; and introduced several new mouldings. At first we see the modified Romanesque style was adopted; but at a very early period they appear to have exchanged it for a pointed style. In the details of their great works, we find mixed with their own Norman ornaments the features of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine architecture, which union gives a very striking and decided appearance to the buildings, such as we do not observe elsewhere. At a glance you are reminded of the various powers whose way had been successively acknowledged. You trace the marks of the eastern and western empires, of the rule of the Greek and Roman, the Mahomedan and Christian. The

* Concluded from p. 606, ante.

* Which has been authoritatively disproved.—Ed.